

I'm Sorry for My Bad English: Why Does EFL Learner Say It?

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ABSTRACT

Generally, people are apologizing after they make a mistake or do certain acts which offend others. But the context in which the apology needs to be said in every culture can be different. Therefore, EFL learners may fail to use appropriate apology strategy within the context since they are interfered by their L1 culture. However, the case of Richy, an adult EFL learner originally from Java, is a bit different. He apologizes by saying "I'm sorry for my bad English" before he starts speaking. This unique phenomenon leads me to observe and interview him to gain an answer to what factors which might affect him to do so and how that act will influence his speaking. The result shows that Richy's act was affected by cultural and psychological aspects where he got a pragmalinguistic failure in using his speech act of apology and tried to reach his need for safety through it. By reaching his need, he felt more motivated and gained his self-efficacy in delivering his speech.

INTRODUCTION

Apology is a common occurrence in everyday life, particularly in the maintenance of friendships. Regarding cultural differences, people with different cultures may generate different strategies in apologizing. Thus, there is also a possibility that people who learn certain foreign languages will apologize in a situation that they believe they have to say it based on their cultural knowledge while they are communicating with the target language. In the speech act of apology, Asians tend to apologize more than Americans (Gallup in Tavucis, 1991). It shows that the context of apology between those two cultures is different.

As EFL learners, there might be limited knowledge about this act of apology due to cultural background. This is what I believe, happened to many Indonesian EFL learners and Richy is not the exception. Richy is an adult EFL learner joining MAINEC, a non-profit English club based in Malang, Indonesia. In every meeting, there is a session where all coming members must deliver a two-minute speech based on the topic given. Usually, members will start it using some fillers such as 'all right', 'so', 'okay', 'well', or even thanking 'thank you for the chance', 'thanks in advance'. But Richy, he always starts it with 'sorry for my bad English'. He is apologizing. For me, it is unique. Does apology need to be delivered even people do not make any mistake yet? Is being

influenced or using incorrect grammatical rules while speaking sinful? Why did he need to apologize actually? Those kinds of questions keep bothering me and encourage me to seek the probability answer for that. Therefore, this paper is aimed to find the answer to why EFL learners need to apologize before they are delivering a speech.

Speech Act of Apologies

Generally, the act of apologizing is called for when there is certain behavior that has violated social norms. When an action or utterance has resulted in the fact that one or more persons perceive themselves as offended, the culpable person(s) needs to apologize (Istifci, 2009). So, in this case, there should be an apologizer and a recipient of the apology (Trosborg, 1995). The act of apologizing requires an action or an utterance which is intended to "set things right" (Olshtain, 1983). As Marquez-Reiter (2000) states an apology is a "compensatory action for an offense committed by the speaker which has affected the hearer. According to Bataneh & Bataneh (2006) apologies fall under expressive speech acts in which speakers attempt to indicate their state or attitude. They add that for apology to have an effect, it should reflect true feelings.

Searle (1979) states a person who apologizes for doing A expresses regret at having done A so the apology act can

take place only if the speaker believes that some act A has been performed prior to the time of speaking and that this act A resulted in an infraction which affected another person who is now deserving an apology. Apology speech acts have been investigated cross-culturally to find similarities and differences between the languages. The studies have generally been carried out in situations where learners learn the target language as their second language. The studies have shown that some learners employ language transfer from their L1, some learners approximate native speaker norms or some learners use completely different formulas different from the formulas they use in their L1 or L2.

Strategies to Apologize

According to Blum-Kulka and Olshtain (1984) apologies are post-event acts which refer to an event, has already taken place or that will take place. Since there appears to be a variation of definitions of apology, researchers provided different types of apology strategies. Olshtain and Cohen (1983) classified apology strategies into five main categories, namely: explanation, expression of apology, promise of non-recurrence, acknowledgment of responsibility, and offer of repair. Blum-Kulka, House, and Kasper (1989) classified apology strategies into five categories, namely: offer of repair, illocutionary force indicating devices, taking on responsibility, promise of forbearance, and explanation or account.

According to Fraser (1981) apologies are classified into nine strategies, namely: requesting the acceptance of the given apology, announcing that apology is forthcoming through clauses, stating the offender's obligation to apology with words like "I must apologize", offering to apologize, expressing regret for the offense through the use of intensifiers, acknowledging responsibility for the act, requesting forgiveness for the offense, promising forbearance from a similar offending act, and offering redress to show that the offender really regrets the offense with offers.

Previous Studies

Some previous studies related to the speech act of apology in terms of cross-cultural background had been conducted. Several research studies which give a huge impact on this field are conducted by Blum-Kulka & Olshtain (1984), Cohen & Olshtain (1981, 1993), Cohen, Olshtain, and Rosenstein (1986), Olshtain (1983, 1989), Trosborg (1987, 1995), and Bergman and Kasper (1993). While some latest studies in this topic have been done by Shih (2006), Istifci (2009), Uгла and Abidin (2016). In general, most of the studies were done only to see whether they use proper apology strategy in a certain context. The participants were given a certain situation to find out whether or not they could imply a proper strategy of apology in the target language. To wrap up, the result showed that it is influenced by the universality and specificity of the speech act of apology, contextual factors, and proficiency level.

All of the existing studies analyze this issue through a sociopragmatics' point of view. Moreover, they were conducted by intentionally giving the participants particular situations to reveal the use of the apology strategy. Here in my paper,

I took the data from real context and I try to emphasize not only from sociopragmatics but also psycholinguistics perspective to reveal what factors may affect the participant to apologize before delivering English speech and how that act gives effect to speaking performance.

METHODOLOGY

The focus of this study is to Richy, an adult Javanese EFL learner. The data were gained through observation and an interview consisted of semi-structured questions. The observation was done to give a real-context description of what was happening during the phenomenon occurred. The interview is considered as an effective instrument to get invisible data that cannot be observed directly, such as feelings, beliefs, behavior, intentions, and thoughts (Merriam, 1991).

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The Effect of Cultural Factor

Richy felt that he needs to apologize since he considered himself not fluent in English. As Javanese, it is usual for him to say that even before he tried to speak. In his culture, it can be considered as politeness. Javanese tend to feel uneasy easily. They have much worried about making other people disappointed with them. In Richy's case, he was worried about making other MAINEC's members disappointed with him because of his poor English. His awareness of his competence made him feel uneasy to others. Those kinds of thoughts embrace him feeling guilty of himself. Therefore, he decided to apologize.

In fact, some other members took it differently. Since MAINEC is an English club, some regular members believe that they have to bring English culture as well whenever they speak the target language. Because of this belief, even one of them said to Richy that what he had done is not appropriate since they do not think that native English do what Richy had done.

From a cultural point of view, Richy seemed to fail to bring and transfer his L1 culture to the L2. This condition is what Thomas (1983) introduced as 'pragmatic failure'. He defined the term as the inability to understand what is meant by what is said. Pragmatic failure is a major source of cross-cultural communication breakdown (Shih, 2006). Specifically, Richy was facing pragmalinguistic failure that Thomas (1983) referred to communication breakdown which occurs when the pragmatic force mapped by nonnative speakers onto a given utterance is different from the force most frequently assigned to it by native speaker of the target language, or when speech act strategies are inappropriately transferred from L1 to L2. That is, pragmalinguistic failure occurs when a learner tries to perform the right speech act but uses the wrong linguistic means (Ellis, 1994).

However, regarding to the situation when Richy spoke out his apology, it does not meet the precondition for the apology act as simplified by Trosborg (1995) such as when a person has performed an act (action or utterance), or failed to

do so, which has offended another person, and for which he/she can be held responsible, the offender needs to apologize to set things right. In this case, Richy as the apologizer has not done any action yet before he apologizes which means there is no offended party. If his apology is not because he has done mistakes or offended other people, then there should be another reason for him delivering the apology.

The Effect of the Psychological Factor

Before Richy got his turn to speak, he realized that other members spoke before him were good in English, or at least that was what he thought. That fact made him even worried about how he would deliver his speech later. He was worried that other members would consider his English was not as good as the previous speakers, and he was not ready for being judged. Being in that situation, he finally decided to apologize while began his speech to inform others that he might not be as good as the previous speakers with the expectation that they would not judge him later. A further effect of this thought was he felt save for making mistakes during his speech since he believed that other members already understood his language deficiency right after he said sorry. Furthermore, this 'safe' feeling could encourage him in speaking.

The psychological aspects rely on Richy are closely related to self-efficacy, needs, and motivation. Before he said the apology, he lacks belief of himself being a success in delivering the speech. Whereas, if a learner is confident in his ability to perform a task successfully, he will be motivated to engage in it (Barkley, 2010). To be engaged in such an English discussion activity, learners need the motivation to do that. But before going to motivation, they have to fulfill their needs first. In Richy's case, he lacks self-efficacy since he felt that his basic need is not fulfilled yet, which is safety. According to Barkley (2010), when the basic need for safety is not fulfilled, learners will be discouraged to actively participate in a discussion and say what they truly think since they are feeling anxious about rejection or criticism from their peers. Therefore, Richy decided to apologize as a result of his consideration that it is the way for him to get his need.

CONCLUSIONS

Apologizing as one of the speech acts needs particular context and circumstance in delivering it. The use of the wrong strategy in stating apology may lead to what we called as pragmalinguistic failure which is much affected by the transfer of L1 culture to the target language culture. Nevertheless, an apology is commonly stated after the apologizer doing an act which he or the person who deserves the apology consider it as an offensive one. In Richy's case, his apology is not for his offensive act since he has not done anything yet. Moreover, apologizing for having bad English before speaking is not a common strategy included in apology speech acts. Therefore, it should not be analyzed through sociopragmatics or pragmalinguistics only, but also psycholinguistics. Although through sociopragmatics' point of view resulted that Richy got a pragmalinguistic failure, but it leads him to reach his need of being safe from anxiety feeling and peo-

ple's judgment which finally can encourage him to speak by using the target language.

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